

Posted on Sat, Nov. 02, 2002

The Mercury News

Why state has few real races for House

REDISTRICTING, DEALS ENTRENCH INCUMBENTS

By Jim Puzzanghera
Mercury News Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON - Two years ago, Rep. Mike Honda was in the thick of one of the most competitive congressional races in the country, with Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and key congressional leaders from both parties jetting in to San Jose to raise money and sway voters.

This fall, no big political names are coming anywhere near San Jose.

Honda, D-San Jose, is strongly favored to win re-election, as are all of his 12 Bay Area colleagues in the House of Representatives. Because of politically motivated redistricting and the power of incumbency, there are no competitive congressional races in the region, according to election analysts. There is only one competitive race among all of California's congressional districts, which now number 53 after the 2000 census. That competition comes only because Rep. Gary Condit, D-Modesto, is stepping down after the Chandra Levy controversy.

It is all part of a trend that has seen the number of competitive House seats nationwide more than halved over the past 10 years, limiting the ability of either party to pick up large numbers of seats and fueling more voter apathy.

With the evolution of computer programs to conduct the once-a-decade redistricting process and after deals between Republicans and Democrats to protect incumbents, only about 40 House races are even marginally competitive this year. In 1992, there were 84 such races out of the 435 House seats.

20 races hold key

With Republicans holding just a six-seat majority in the House, voters in no more than 20 too-close-to-call races nationwide actually will determine which party controls the chamber. The stark reality for Bay Area residents, according to the Center for Voting and Democracy, is that they would probably have more of a say in control of the House by sending a campaign contribution to a candidate in one of those tossup races than by going to the polls Tuesday.

"We often criticize citizens for not voting and they don't have many legitimate excuses, but this is one legitimate excuse," said Larry Sabato, director of the Center for Politics at the University of Virginia. "Why bother to vote if there is no contest, if there is no competition?"

Traditionally, the first election after congressional lines are redrawn is the most competitive of a decade. New district boundaries mean new voters for many incumbents. And because the number of House seats is set at 435, states that gain population add new seats that have no incumbents; states that lose population are stripped of seats, often forcing two incumbents to run against each other.

But after the 2000 census, Democratic and Republican officials in California and many other states opted to redraw districts to protect incumbents to a far greater extent than ever before, said Rob Richie, executive director of the non-partisan Center for Voting and Democracy.

"Political calculations far outweighed any public interest in having more competitive choices," Richie said.

The impact of such political calculations is evident by looking at Iowa, one of the few states that use a non-partisan commission to redraw lines instead of leaving it to elected state officials. Four of the five House races in Iowa are competitive this year.

``They draw the lines based on what makes sense for Iowa, believe it or not," Sabato said. ``If you add up California, Illinois, Texas, New York and Virginia, you have exactly the number of competitive House races as in little Iowa. . . . It's incredible."

In California, Democrats and Republicans struck the incumbent-protection deal to avoid the court battles triggered in the past when one party has tried to gerrymander the redistricting process to its advantage. Districts that had been competitive became either more solidly Democratic or Republican.

The Contra Costa County seat held by Rep. Ellen Tauscher, D-Walnut Creek, for example, was won by a Republican as recently as 1994. Her win in 1996 was an upset, and she was targeted by Republicans in 1998. This year, she doesn't even have a GOP challenger.

``Redistricting had something to do with the fact I have no opponent," Tauscher said. Registered Democrats used to outnumber registered Republicans by little more than one percentage point in her district. Now, they outnumber Republicans by 10 percentage points.

Convincing victory

But Honda's district is the clearest example of how redistricting and the power of incumbency have all but eliminated competition for Bay Area House seats.

In 2000, the seat was one of the relatively few nationwide where an incumbent was not running. Former Rep. Tom Campbell, R-Campbell, who held the seat for five years, gave it up to run for the Senate. Vying to replace him were two well-known state Assembly members: Honda and Republican Jim Cunneen.

Honda ended up winning by a surprisingly wide 12 percentage points in a district that stretched from Santa Cruz through Los Gatos and chunks of Santa Clara, Sunnyvale, Campbell and San Jose.

But the district was still viewed as ripe for upset because of its history of electing a moderate Republican.

``This redistricting was done very carefully, and they knew that Mike Honda's seat was at risk," said Larry Gerston, a San Jose State University political-science professor.

Democrats in communities such as Gilroy were shifted to Honda's district from the much safer district of Zoe Lofgren, D-San Jose. The changes resulted in a wider gap between registered Democrats and Republicans: from 10 percentage points to nearly 14 percentage points.

``The district isn't the same district; it's fundamentally different," said Cunneen, now president of the San Jose Silicon Valley Chamber of Commerce.

But Cunneen also said Honda has done a good job, which makes it hard to unseat him. Nationally, nearly 99 percent of House incumbents have been re-elected in the past two elections.

Honda, 61, does not think redistricting is the main reason why he is strongly favored to win his race with Republican challenger Linda Rae Hermann. He said he has tried to stay responsive to his constituents, traveling back to San Jose every weekend while the House is in session and launching a Web site that was named one of the 15 best in Congress earlier this year.

Confident of his re-election, Honda has traveled to states like Colorado, Minnesota and New Jersey this

year to help rally Asian-American support for Democratic candidates.

Meanwhile, Hermann, a 62-year-old from San Jose who serves on the Berryessa school board, has been trying to unseat him on a tight budget. With the race off the national radar screen, Hermann has raised just \$27,817. Honda has raised \$815,213. And she has had no success luring big-name Republicans to come campaign or raise money.

``We did our proper amount of requests," she said. ``I've been around long enough to know you knock on a door once, and then you move on."

© 2001 mercurynews and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.bayarea.com>